

# **Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are as Timely Today as Five Centuries Ago**

By Michael A. Ledeen

*Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) devoted much of his considerable energy and talent to identifying and understanding the characteristics of good and bad leaders. In this lively book, Michael A. Ledeen recasts Machiavelli's basic principles of leadership and assesses contemporary giants of statecraft, commerce, military affairs, and sports in light of Machiavelli's enduring standards of excellence. The following summary is adapted from the introduction.*

*Michael A. Ledeen holds the Freedom Chair at AEI. His previous books include Freedom Betrayed: How America Led a Global Democratic Revolution, Won the Cold War, and Walked Away (1996), Superpower Dilemmas: The U.S. and the U.S.S.R. at Century's End (1991); and Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair (1988).*

The purpose of *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership* is the same as Niccolò Machiavelli's own: to present the basic principles of the proper and successful use of power in language that contemporary leaders can understand, the better to advance the common good.

Like Machiavelli, we live at a moment of profound change in all areas of human endeavor. Just as he did, we see corruption reaching deep into Western societies at the very moment we have soundly defeated many of our most dangerous enemies. Success, it turns out, carries its own risks, and being top dog makes us more vulnerable to self-indulgence and less attentive to the requirements of virtue that underlie any enduring enterprise.

Machiavelli's examples are drawn from the past, above all from classical antiquity. That was appropriate to his Renaissance audience, but since our educational system no longer provides us with the knowledge necessary to appreciate or evaluate his examples, I have substituted many modern ones in this volume. And since the rules are the same for leaders in all walks of life, I have included businessmen and sports figures along with military, political, and religious leaders. Instead of Borgias and Sforzas, Caesars and Medicis, you will find Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, Leo Durocher and Vince Lombardi.

Machiavelli would welcome this update, although he would insist that anyone who wants to understand the dynamics of power and the methods of successful leadership must study history. It is not good enough to read the newspapers, or watch television, and try to understand today all by itself. Human nature doesn't change, above all at the top, where questions of success and survival are paramount, and there is little time for the niceties. The serious study of the past provides the raw material for wise decisions today and tomorrow. We are prone to the same kinds of mistakes our predecessors made, and we must emulate the great acts of past heroes.

Our own leaders badly need a refresher course. Among other blunders, they invariably give the wrong answer to one of Machiavelli's basic questions: Is it better to be more loved than feared, or more feared than loved? Western leaders from John Major and Bill Clinton to Silvio Berlusconi and Benjamin Netanyahu have desperately sought love from both friends and foes, to the ruin of their

domestic and international enterprises. Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Lee Kwan Yu, Bill Gates, and Pope John Paul II knew better, and reshaped the world.

## **Machiavelli's Genius**

How is it that after nearly five hundred years, Machiavelli's insights still challenge and inspire us so powerfully? Of course, he's a genius, "an Italian genius," as the philosopher Benedetto Croce rightly insisted, with the unique combination of wit, rhetorical flair, and ruthless analysis that characterizes the highest accomplishments of Italian thinkers. But there is more.

In Renaissance Florence all received wisdom was being challenged by some of the greatest intellects, adventurers, and artists in history. New worlds were being discovered, new masterpieces created, and new ideas propounded with every passing month. Tumult and chaotic change were commonplace. The year after Machiavelli began working for the Florentine Republic, Michelangelo finished the *Pietà*. The *David* was started shortly afterwards, and following its completion it was placed in front of the Palazzo della Signoria, where Machiavelli's office was located. In Machiavelli's third year of service, Amerigo Vespucci set sail on his second voyage to the East Indies. By then, Columbus's four voyages were complete, the Jews had been expelled from Spain, and Portuguese explorers were laying claim to areas of the globe hitherto only guessed at. In 1510, when Machiavelli was still a young official in the Florentine government, Martin Luther went to Rome to lodge a protest against the corruption of the Catholic Church. Nothing, it seemed, was left unchallenged.

Machiavelli was part of this intellectual ferment, and thus both witnessed and participated in the birth pangs of the modern world. Being present at the creation, he was able to see with unusual clarity the fundamental rules of modern leadership, and he laid them down with brutal candor. As his Pulitzer Prize biographer, Sebastian De Grazia, puts it: "Niccolò invents a new moral reasoning, and, more, redimensions the world, visible and invisible, balancing heaven and hell and making room for a different earth." We inhabit that "different earth," and Machiavelli's rules are as valid for us as they were for the leaders he counseled five hundred years ago.

Prior to the Renaissance, the lord of a domain could protect himself against his foreign enemies by building a castle and a wall. If he were besieged, he could hire mercenaries or find allies to lift the siege; in the meantime his walls would protect him and his subjects. But by the time Machiavelli rose to a position of great influence in the government of Florence, armies had artillery able to blow holes in the walls in minutes. Under such an attack, as the enemy poured in through the breach, there would be no time to find allies or hired guns to defend the lord and his subjects. Survival now would hinge on the willingness of the lord's people to fight and die for him. Convincing people to do that is a political task. It requires methods of leadership unknown or, as Machiavelli would prefer, forgotten in the Middle Ages. That is why Machiavelli insists on national armies, not mercenaries. He understands that soldiers in such armies need to be motivated. Dying for one's country does not come naturally; it requires belief in the worthiness of one's cause and the nobility of one's leaders. Modern politics are born from this necessity, and we moderns ignore it at our peril. Enemies are always ready to march, or fly, or launch.

Machiavelli rejects the simplistic notion that war is a drastic departure from normal behavior. Having studied history, he knows that peace is rarer than war. We may not know who our next enemy will be, but we can be sure there will be one, and leaders who fail to prepare for the next war—on the battlefield, at the ballot box, or in the marketplace—are likely to be defeated. Machiavelli tells us how to design and implement winning strategies.

Like us, Machiavelli is saddened, frustrated, sometimes even enraged by the sight of mediocre leadership, that which is more corrupt than courageous, more self-indulgent than great in spirit. He knows from his study of history that men and women are often like that, but he also knows what greatness is and how it can be achieved by the best of us. He is not optimistic about the course of human affairs, but he does not shirk the challenge to engage it and to educate and perhaps inspire a new breed of leader. He calls for those who care about their nation to risk everything, even their immortal souls, to achieve power and lift their people out of the moral slime into which they have fallen.

## **Fortune**

In addition to change, Machiavelli understands the role of luck. At the height of his powers, through no fault of his own, he is fired, imprisoned, tortured, and barred from the activities to which he has devoted nearly all his thoughts and passions. Bad luck! Licking his wounds and turning his genius to writing, he spends the bulk of his time in a local inn, drinking, cursing, and playing games, specifically, a version of backgammon and a Tuscan card game. Such games involve both luck and skill, and on any given occasion even the greatest player may be overwhelmed by a run of bad luck, even though, over time, the great player will win and the novice or duffer will be a loser.

I suspect that Machiavelli's love of card games is of some importance in the development of his politics, for card players live in a world quite different from that of players of board games. The board conceals nothing, and it is unnecessary to communicate with other players. In card games, most of the cards are concealed for much of each deal, and communication—whether through bidding or betting—is an integral part of the contest. Where there is communication, a whole new set of problems arises: If you tell all to your partner, your enemies obtain the same information, and it may be more valuable to them than to your ally. You may prefer to deceive them, but in so doing you risk inducing your partner to err before they do, thereby spelling ruin for your side.

It is no accident that this lover of card games appreciates the importance, and risk, of communication, including secrecy and deception. Machiavelli uses codes in some of his official correspondence, and is one of the first political thinkers to exploit the new technology of printing to spread his ideas. He would be right at home in the upper levels of Western corporations, where modern princes like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates spend many happy hours playing bridge, the game that best combines all these elements of communication with enormous technical challenges, yet preserves the element of luck that can wreck even the most brilliant plan or make a fool into the hero of the day.

## **Good Laws, Good Arms and Good Religion**

Machiavelli is commonly thought of as the ultimate cynic and an apologist for dictators. His name has become an adjective for cruel leaders prepared to do anything to retain or increase their wealth and power. It is therefore surprising to discover that Machiavelli prefers free institutions to authoritarian ones and reserves his greatest scorn for tyrants. Machiavelli also has a great deal to say about the importance of religious faith and of virtue. He believes that, along with good soldiers and good laws, the best state—the one that rests upon the free activity of its citizens—requires good religion. He considers Moses to be the greatest leader because he created a new religion and a new state and conversed with God. He believes fear of God underlies respect for men. To be sure, his concept of Christianity is much at odds with the prevailing theology and practice of his day. He

considers the Roman Catholic Church too corrupt and too soft. He wants a tougher, more virile version of the faith, which will inspire men to fight for the glory of their country, and he wants a more spartan church, one devoted to the glory of the spirit rather than the tangible wealth of the Papal Court.

Ever the realist, he knows that leaders will sometimes have to violate religious strictures to prevail against merciless enemies and competitors, or to restore a corrupt enterprise to good health. But he condemns leaders who make cynical opportunism a trademark of their careers. He wants his leaders to be virtuous, and to transmit virtuous standards to their followers.

Machiavelli uses the term *virtue* in many different ways, sometimes to mean power, at other times in more traditional senses: valor, worth, merit, moral perfection. That is very different from current usage, and, as the philosopher Leo Strauss once remarked, it is mysterious that "a word that used to mean the manliness of man has come to mean the chastity of women." Machiavelli is of the old school, and he counts virtue, in its traditional sense, an essential ingredient—indeed the highest possible achievement—of good leadership. That is its meaning in this book.

Brooding over Italian leaders' lack of virtue, Machiavelli finds little to surprise him. The corruption and disintegration of great enterprises is neither new nor shocking, after all. It is our history and our destiny. Even the most glorious human achievements, the creations of the most virtuous leaders, have usually been short-lived. They have all fallen, more often than not because of internal decay. Moses' state of Israel was destroyed, as was Cyrus's Persian Empire. Theseus, the third figure in Machiavelli's triumvirate of most glorious leaders, set Athens on the path to civilization, but the Golden Age of Athens lasted less than a century. We should not be surprised to see some of the glorious enterprises of our own day fail and pass away.

Machiavelli understands the pathology of decay, this oft-fatal disease of the body politic. He has identified and catalogued the microbes that infect leaders' minds and spirits, dragging us to ruin. Anyone looking at the modern world through Machiavelli's eyes will see, as he saw in his own day, an epidemic of corruption, causing a perilous shortage of virtuous leaders, and a growing threat to freedom. Machiavelli's diagnosis helps us better understand our own problems as well as the requirements for leaders capable of restoring virtue and preserving free institutions. Although he is not optimistic about the final outcome, he has a cure.

But it is a painful therapy.